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"He floats from the operating booth...": the tale not told of *Sherlock Jr.*

By Polly Rose

Buster Keaton striding right up into the cinema screen - and being punched right out again - is among the most iconic scenes in moving pictures. But did it always happen that way? There's an intriguing phrase in the Los Angeles Times review of *Sherlock Jr.*, dated May 11 1924, during its first run at Tally's Theater:

"As a motion-picture operator in the making *he upsets every technical calculation and floats from the operating booth to the screen* where he continues his comedy work." [my italics]

That's not *Sherlock Jr.* as we know it - it sounds more like science fiction. Was Tally's showing an earlier print of the film, a version from before the dream sequence was added to start the "film within a film"? Or could the journalist have been remembering an earlier preview? I set out to chart the film's developing storyline and discover whether that description of the Tally's screening was simply the result of an overtired journalist, or a clue to a previously undiscovered alternate version of the film.

Looking at trade press advertisements for early 1924, it's apparent that *Sherlock Jr.* wasn't a straightforward production - several missed release deadlines whizz by. Originally slated to be one of four Metro releases in March - on February 8 1924, with filming completed, The Film Daily advertised the release date for *Sherlock Jr.* as March 10 - the film was eventually released after several postponements on April 21, 1924.

Given that initial filming was completed on time, why the delays? Variety reported on May 21 1924 that Keaton held several sneak previews of *Sherlock Jr.*, making significant changes to the film each time.¹ After the first preview in Long Beach, Cal., he "took in all the comment he heard among the audience and decided that the picture would not do. He tore it apart and started remaking it." After a second preview in a Los Angeles suburb, he filmed some new material and recut the film again. Finally, after a successful third preview held at midnight in Los Angeles, "Buster took it back to the studio, cut it considerably and then scheduled it for

¹ I am indebted to Kevin Brownlow for directing me to this report. Kevin mentions the previews in his unpublished manuscript *The Search for Buster Keaton*.

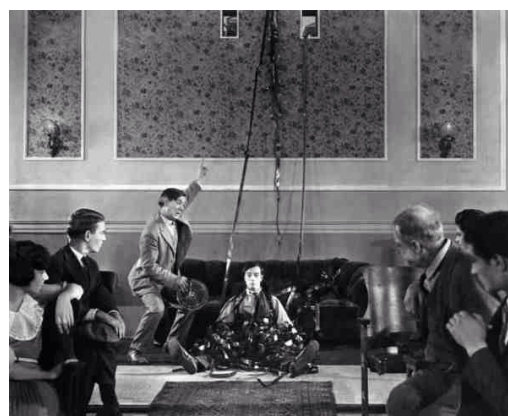
release.” The report notes that around 60,000 feet of film were shot for the film, of which only about 5,000 feet were used in the final version.

When Variety’s reporter says Buster “tore it apart” and “cut it considerably” it is meant literally, as he was the editor of his films. This production still of the projection room in *Sherlock Jr.* gives an idea of his film editing equipment: it wasn’t much more complicated than scissors, film cement and rewind cranks, though he would have had a film joiner and a light box in the cutting room.



So, what was on those other 55,000 feet of celluloid? Somewhere in there did Buster float off on the beam of his projector?

As a film editor myself I’ve long had a hunch that *Sherlock Jr.* was originally much more about the medium of film. These stills show a scene not included in the final cut, with Buster the projectionist entangled in film reels:





There are clues to the possible action of the scene - a stunt wire seems to run across Buster's chest, underneath his shirt, and then up out of shot on the right-hand side. Given the placement of the sofa directly under the projection booth window, could Buster have tumbled out of the booth - or was he spat back out of the cinema screen into the real world, landing in a tangle of celluloid?

Buster had a projector in his own home, and according to the Exhibitors Trade Review "well knows the troubles and the difficulties that beset an operator from his own personal experiences." So he would have been able to do a projectionist's job on film, and mess up the tasks in a controlled and entertaining way. At the start of the filming process, did that seem to offer more comic possibilities than the final film delivered? Were those jokes only funny to people familiar with the process of filmmaking?

As an example, on January 28, about halfway through initial filming², the Los Angeles Times described a scene from Buster's upcoming film showing a small-town censorship board at work:

² The Exhibitors Trade Review had reported on January 12 that *Sherlock, Jr.* would "probably begin active production shortly", and the Los Angeles Times quoted studio manager Lou Anger on February 8 that Buster had "just finished filming".

"A perfectly harmless motion-picture, after it is dissected by this board, is clipped, cut and sheared down until nothing is left of it except the tag reading "Passed by the Hickville Board of Censorship.""

The "shearing" would likely have been done by Buster as the projectionist, at the editing bench in his projection booth. A film hacked about beyond all sense by the censors would leave a series of random jump cuts - much like the jump cuts that throw Buster around once he has walked successfully into the cinema screen. Was that scene once justified in the storyline as the result of Buster-the-projectionist's own editing of the film for the censors, before Keaton and his team discovered that it got laughs from an audience without any set-up?

There's another, more persistent storyline angle that is not part of the *Sherlock Jr.* we know today. On December 30 1923 the Los Angeles Times carried the first report of the title of "the new Keaton comedy currently filming..."*Sherlock, Junior*"...the adventures of a lowly projection machine operator in a hick town theater, who comes to Los Angeles and captures the queen of filmland."

Not only is the romance element completely different, but in this version Buster's character is operating in geographical reality and not in a dream world. The Hollywood romance storyline seems to have continued past at least the first preview - the Exhibitors Trade Review reports on March 15th that *Sherlock Jr.* is being edited and titled for release:

"The story has to do with a young man, a projectionist, who deserts his calling for Hollywood and after divers adventures ends up marrying the most beautiful of the stars."

It's conceivable that newspaper and magazine editors may have been working from out-of-date press releases, but clearly this storyline was planned at the time the press was briefed.

The production still photographs, taken during filming, are another valuable source of information. The code numbers of individual stills give clues to the order in which they were taken (or at least numbered), offering a possible timeline of when particular scenes were shot, including those dropped from the final cut. They are labelled with the prefix 'K22-', the production number for *Sherlock Jr.*. Not all the stills are available, and the highest code number I have found is K22-101.

The still of the opening scene in which Buster looks at his detective handbook in the cinema is numbered K22-66, indicating that it was shot over half way through production - possibly a reshoot of the original opening, in order to emphasise the trainee-detective aspect of the story.

In contrast, the scene where Buster buys candy was filmed early, judging by the stills number (K22-14), suggesting this was an early plot idea - Buster the projectionist, low on funds, trying to woo his girl in competition with his rival, played by Ward Crane. The stills for the early scene at the Girl's house, where Buster courts Kathryn McGuire's character with candy and is set up to take the fall for the watch theft, also have low numbers (K22-20 - K22-27) indicating that scene was filmed early in production and stayed the distance.

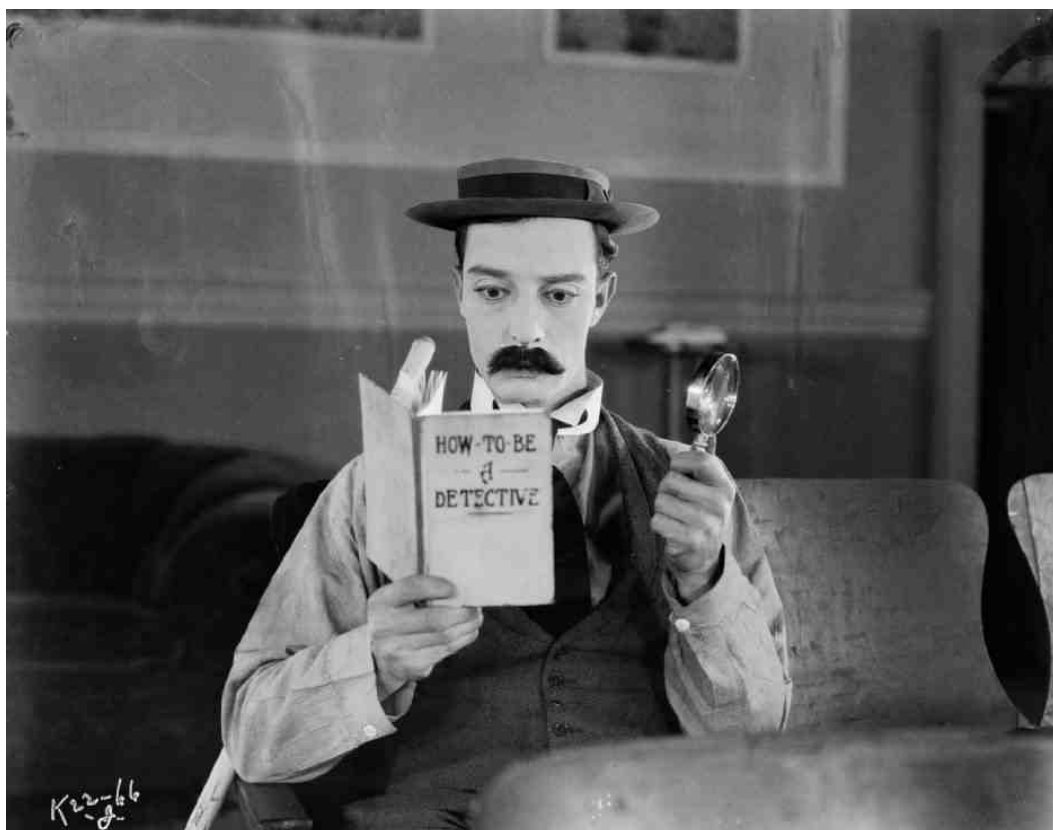
Reshoots were a normal part of Keaton's filmmaking practice: he told George C. Pratt in 1958 that "we helped the high spots, and redid the bad ones, and cut footage out, and get scenes that would connect things up for us. We always put a makeup on and set the camera back up after that first preview. And generally after the second one, also...."³

There are some continuity errors in the scene at the Girl's house which could suggest that pickup shots were filmed later to make the sequence clearer. The curtains in the window of the house have a gap, and a piece of paper in the window, for the shots of Buster altering the price of the candy, and for his rival's first arrival at the house; but there is no gap and no paper when Buster skips up the path. Buster's hair is combed differently in the part of the scene where Ward Crane's character reads the detective book over his shoulder, realises he will search everyone, and plants the pawn ticket in his pocket - was that section added to clarify the reason for Crane's actions, or to highlight the book?

³ Quoted in *Image* vol 17 no 4 (1974), republished in *Keaton: Interviews* ed. Kevin W. Sweeney, University Press of Mississippi 2007, p.41



Buster's book in this scene reads "HOW TO BE A DETECTIVE by A. Sherlock", but in the opening scene it simply reads "HOW TO BE A DETECTIVE", suggesting the two scenes were filmed some time apart.





When Buster “shadows his man closely” on leaving the Girl’s house, the book once again seems not to feature the author’s name, suggesting that this scene was also filmed later. Maybe previews revealed a need for more laughs at this point, and the chase sequence delivered, as well as rounding off this section of the film nicely.

We do in fact have evidence that this scene was filmed late in production. Recalling the shot in which he falls from the water tower at the end of the chase, a fall he later discovered had broken his neck, Keaton told Kevin Brownlow in 1964⁴

“...when I fell...my head fell right across the rail...And I had a headache for a few hours. I remember I had Donald Crisp with me, too, because I was out getting... these were the last scene shots for that picture, and we had already made a deal with him for *The Navigator*. And he was with me on the location.”

The press archives back up Buster’s memory. Crisp’s engagement as the director of the next Buster Keaton film was announced on February 8, and on March 30 with work still continuing on *Sherlock Jr.* the Los Angeles Times reported that Donald Crisp “is in daily consultation at the Keaton studio” about the next film -

⁴ published in *Buster Keaton: Interviews* ed. Kevin Sweeney, University Press of Mississippi 2007, p202

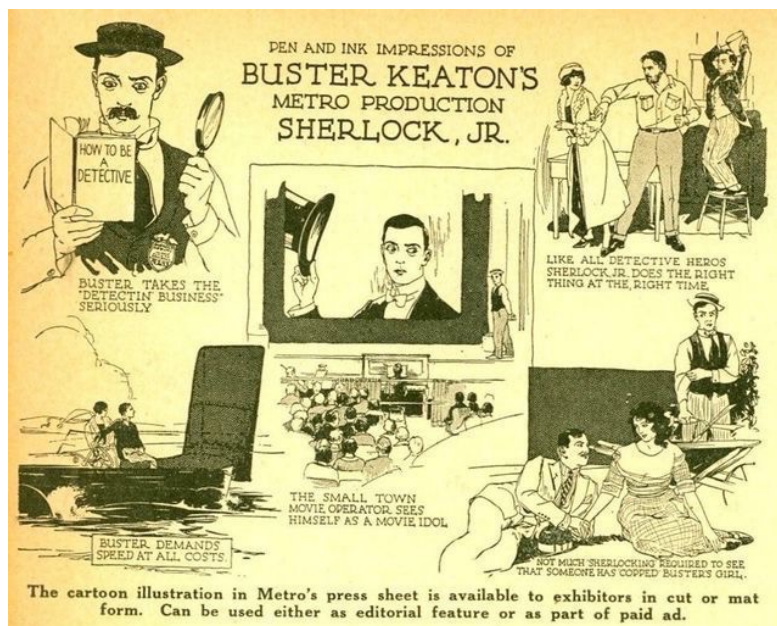
unsurprisingly, since this was three weeks after *Sherlock Jr.*'s originally planned release date.

Two stills that don't appear in the final film are particularly intriguing, as they show the cinema audience watching Buster as Sherlock Jr on the screen - in one he wears a top hat, in another he gazes at Kathryn McGuire as she plays piano.



They seem to suggest that in one version of the film, the cinema audience were more present throughout and we were more aware of the two worlds - of the audience and of the film. However, the positions and poses of the audience and the band are identical in both stills, perhaps indicating that they were created in the darkroom as standalone publicity stills and may not have represented scenes shot as part of the film.

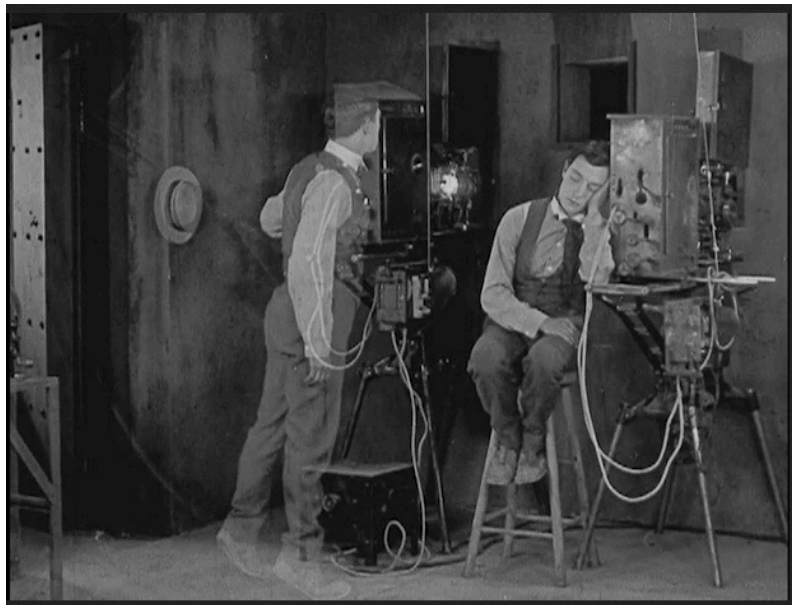
In Metro's press sheet a further leap is made, with a cartoon image combining the still of Buster the projectionist standing on stage in front of the cinema screen (K22-28, indicating that it was filmed early) with the image of Buster in a top hat from a separate still. This gives the impression that he is watching himself from the screen - something that does not occur in the film as we know it. (It's worth bearing in mind that press for *Sherlock Jr.* was likely being prepared while the film was still being edited.)



In later life, Buster said in interviews that the dream sequence element was key to making *Sherlock Jr.* work, because he used stage tricks as part of the action. As he told it, the idea had come from his cameraman Elgin Lessley, who said that in order to use the material he wanted to include the film, "you can't do it and tell a legitimate story, because there are illusions... It's got to come in a dream."⁵ Could it be that this conversation with Lessley didn't happen before the start of filming, but much later in the process, finding a solution to a problem with the film after an unsuccessful preview?

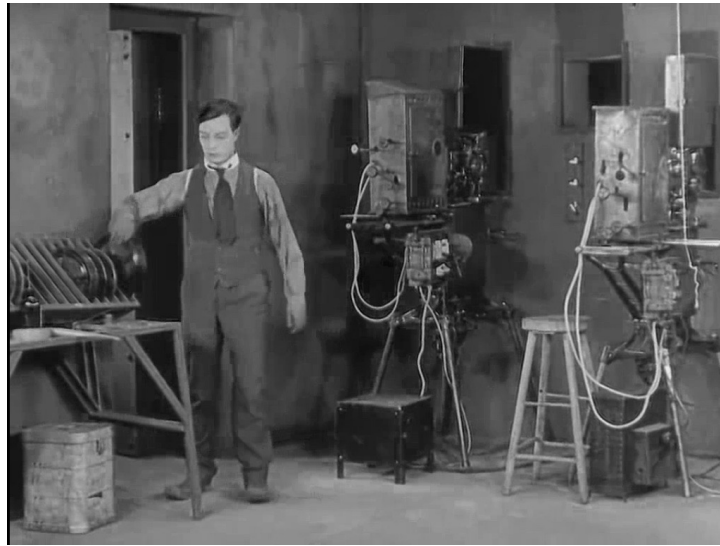
⁵ Interview with Robert and Joan Franklin, 1958, published in *Buster Keaton: Interviews* ed. Kevin Sweeney, University Press of Mississippi 2007, p90

There are some continuity clues as to when the “going to sleep” and “waking up” scenes bookending the dream were filmed. When Buster falls asleep and his dream self emerges, the rewind crank is just visible on his editing bench in the left edge of the shot. However, when Buster walks into the booth and hangs up his hat after getting drenched on the railway line, and when he wakes up from the dream, and when the Girl visits him to say she’s solved the mystery, the rewind crank is not there. And in those scenes there is a black box underneath the right-hand projector that isn’t present in the “falling asleep” scene. The crank is also visible in the still of Buster at his editing bench (K22-69), possibly suggesting that the “going to sleep” scene was filmed about two-thirds of the way through the shoot.



Crank.

This was an in-camera double-exposure effect shot, so it could have been filmed on a separate day for that reason. It’s possible to observe the folds of the black fabric with which the set was draped to create the ghostly double exposure: they move when Buster gets off the stool and again when he picks up his hat and walks out of the room. If there had been more time left in the schedule, would they have reshot this scene in order to lose the movement of the drapes?



No crank.



No crank.



Also no crank.

The presence/absence of the crank and the black box under the projector seem to suggest there were two separate blocks of filming on that set, possibly due to pickups of extra material being needed following one of the previews. As David B. Pearson has pointed out⁶, the “waking up” scene must have been filmed after the scene with the car in the lake, in order to match the action. The stills of the car in the lake are numbered K22-98 & K22-99, so it seems likely the “waking up” scene was shot towards the very end of filming. The latest still number I have found is K22-101,

⁶ “Playing Detective: Possible Solutions to the Production Mysteries of Sherlock Jr.” in *Buster Keaton’s “Sherlock Jr.”* ed. Andrew Horton, Cambridge University Press 1997, p.150

which shows Buster as Sherlock Jr peering through the stomach of his assistant Gillette, dressed as a woman. In fact the later stills (K22-89 - K22-101) are all from the big finish chase and rescue in the film-within-a-film, which involves some of the biggest “illusions” that cameraman Elgin Lessley felt should be justified by putting them in a dream - was the dream therefore also a late addition?⁷

Some reviews of the film on release do mention the dream sequence as we know it:

“Buster, as a moving picture operator, falls asleep in the booth, and dreaming, walks right into the picture.”

The Film Daily, Sunday April 20 1924

“Buster’s dream self strides down the aisle and walks right onto the screen.”

Moving Picture World, May 17 1924

But... the Exhibitors Trade Review on May 17 1924 tells it differently:

“Buster’s burning desire to achieve great heights as a sleuth reaches a feverish climax in a dream, while he dozes at the side of his projection machine. *He becomes entangled in the film which oozes out of the machine. He is wafted through the projection booth aperture and dissolves right into action on the screen.*” [my italics]

So the audience would have seen both Buster dreaming *and* him becoming part of the on-screen action by merging with the film print. That’s not all - a preview from the Los Angeles Times, dated April 25 1924, reads:

“In “Sherlock, Jr” which is coming to Loew’s State Theater Saturday, Buster shows filmdom something new ... *one night Buster floats off on the beam of his projector and jumps right in the Hollywood stuff himself.*” [my italics]

With three separate references to Buster floating into the cinema screen on the beam of his projector, it seems safe to say that at least one preview copy of *Sherlock Jr.*, and possibly a West Coast exhibition copy, once existed where Buster enters the screen world by dissolving into the projected film. I found a description of another “lost” shot in the Los Angeles Times of December 10 1922 - the ending of *My Wife’s*

⁷ Keaton would also shoot extra material for the big finish chase in *Seven Chances* following a preview later that year.

Relations where Buster descends the wall of a house by swinging from the window blinds. This shot was recently rediscovered and is now available on the new Lobster Films blu-rays of Keaton's short films. Could there be some slim hope that the alternate *Sherlock Jr.* print is still out there somewhere?

More than ninety years ago, Buster was finishing *Sherlock Jr.* against the clock with a new director at the studio eager to begin production on the next film, a newborn baby at home⁸... and a broken neck. Now that *Sherlock Jr.* is safely ensconced in the U.S. National Film Registry and the canon of classic cinema, archive press reports give an insight into the persistence and sheer hard graft that went into making a film so simple in narrative and complex in effects, still breathtaking and delightful today.

Postscript: since this article was completed, Susan Cygan has alerted me to a brief, tantalizing mention of Buster walking on the beam of light from the projection booth to the stage during *Sherlock Jr.*, in Kalton C. Lahue's 1966 book *World of Laughter*. The search continues...

[All screengrabs are from the Kino International Ultimate 2-Disc Edition DVD of *Sherlock Jr.* and *Three Ages*, 2010. Trade press reports are available from the Media History Digital Archive at <http://lantern.mediahist.org>]

⁸ Buster and Natalie's son Robert was born on February 3 1924